

Last Sunday of Easter, May 28, 2006, Liturgical Year “B”

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

“Let Us Never Forget”

MEMORIAL DAY

This past week here in Buffalo, veterans from around the country gathered to remember one of America’s worst wartime disasters. No, it wasn’t Pearl Harbor or the fall of the US garrison in the Philippines. It was the sinking of the British transport ship the *HMT Rohna*, that went down in the Mediterranean Sea Thanksgiving night in 1943. More than 1000 of American soldiers on board died that night. The attack on the *Rohna* was considered such a tremendous blow to morale that reports of its sinking were classified for over fifty years.

And one of the veterans, who has led the way in remembering the Rhona, is survivor Frank Schulz of the Town of Tonawanda. He organized the reunion of veterans and relatives of those lost in the 1943 sinking. Relatives like Maryann Beitel, whose uncle, Captain Carlton Hogan, went down with the *Rohna*. She came to meet veteran Aaron Weber, who told her how her uncle administered first aid on the sinking deck and then handed his life preserver to a man who had lost his. Her uncle was never to be seen again as the ship went down that fateful night.

Tomorrow our nation celebrates Memorial Day, the day set aside to remember and honor the men and women of our Armed Forces who have given their lives for our freedom and in service of our country. I believe it is essential that parents and teachers convey to our young people that Memorial Day is more than just a day to get off school or work, it is more than just a day for picnics and family get togethers. It is more than just another holiday.

Memorial Day, unlike any other secular holiday, points us to what life is all about. You ask, “How can a day that remembers those who died, teach us about the real meaning of life?” Well, that’s what I want to talk about this morning.

But first, I want to briefly highlight the origins and development of Memorial Day here in the US. Memorial Day was first held to honor those who died in our Civil War. The number lost during that terrible war is more than any other conflict in our nation’s history. In World War 1, we lost 118,000 men. In World War 2 the total was 405,000. But in the Civil War over 530,000 lost their lives (twice the current population of the city of Buffalo). Just think of all the families who were affected by such terrible loss of life.

It’s why one can sometimes hear the words from the poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow quoted at many of our military cemeteries:

*“Your silent tents of green
We deck with fragrant flowers
Yours has the suffering been
The Memory shall be ours”*

In 1971, Congress made the last Monday in May the official national holiday. And in more recent years, many families have also seen this as a time to place flowers on the graves of their loved ones.

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But the heart of Memorial Day is not only to remember the lives that were lost for freedom and in service of our nation, it is a day to show our gratitude. To give thanks for the sacrifice that was made, for the price that was paid for our freedom.

THE HOLY EUCHARIST

Now let me ask, where else do we remember the sacrifice that was made for us? Where else do we give thanks for the price that was paid for us? We do it every Sunday here in Church, don't we? It's called the Holy Eucharist. The word, “*eucharist*” means thanksgiving. It is taken from the Greek verb, *eucharisto* which means to give thanks. We give thanks for what Christ has done for us. And in giving thanks we also remember. Recall Jesus' words on the night He died. He took the bread and wine of the Passover meal and He said, when ever you do this, “***Do this in remembrance of Me.***” At the time the disciples didn't know that Jesus was setting the stage for His death to be remembered for all time. And so to remember and to give thanks is not only the key to truly commemorating Memorial Day, it is the key to walking with the Lord God Almighty.

What is it that we remember on Memorial Day and on the Lord's Day?

WHAT DO WE REMEMBER?

First, we remember that we live in a world cursed by sin and death. War is a terrible thing. It brings out the worst in humanity. It causes division, destruction, and death. And yet, we can't forget that God did not create our world for war, but for peace. Where does war come from? The Bible tells us in **James 4:1-2**: “***Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they no come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war.***”

It is from the heart beset by sin. And many times wars are fought for no good reason except the selfish interests of both parties. But there are times when wars are fought to protect the rights of people and throughout our nation's history we have seen this is the case more often than not. When we look back at the wars fought most were fought not just in the name of freedom, but for freedom. The American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War, World War 1, World War 2, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Iraq War.

I believe God's desire is that all men be free. How do I know that? God created Adam and Eve with freedom to choose – freedom to follow God or follow themselves. We call this the gift of free will. Our Founding Fathers recognized this when they wrote in the Declaration of Independence: “***We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.***”

And yet, freedom does not mean that we are free to simply do our own thing or to follow our own selfish desires, freedom can only be truly maintained and experienced when we are free to worship God, when we are free to live for God, to love God and our neighbor, to serve God and those around us. When we are free to do what's right. And it is the curse of sin and death that perverts and thwarts this freedom.

And that’s why freedom has a price. Whether in the natural world or in supernatural world. our physical freedom costs and our spiritual freedom costs. So not only do we remember that we live in a world cursed by sin and death, but we also remember the great price that was paid for our freedom.

Think of all the men and women who lost their lives over the last 225 years. It’s incredible when you think about the price that has been paid so that we can be free to live in a secure land with freedom to worship and better ourselves. You go to Arlington National Cemetery or the cemeteries at Normandy, Gettysburg, the Philippines, and throughout the world, and you’ll see thousands of crosses row after row and you get a sense of the great sacrifice that was made.

That is why serving in our nation’s armed forces is a noble profession. In order for any group to be effective they need a common mission, they recognize that who they represent is greater than themselves, they need to be selfless, be willing to serve and be willing to sacrifice.

We see countless examples throughout our history, men and women willing to pay the price for our freedom in the natural world, but what about freedom in the supernatural world? There is only One who has, only One who could pay such a price and that is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus put it all on the line for us, didn’t He? He had a Mission; a mission to show and pave the way so that all could have an eternal relationship with God. He served others, He served His Father. He sacrificed His position, His power, and His person so that others might not only be truly free but that they might live forever. And He taught and trained His disciples to do the same.

It may be cliché, but it is true: Freedom is never free. It costs. And it takes work to maintain it.

HOW DO WE GIVE THANKS?

Yes, we remember but we also give thanks. And I believe the way we show our gratitude for the price that has been paid by the way we live our lives. We show our gratitude by not taking our freedoms for granted. How do we not take our freedoms for granted? We do it first by thanking our veterans. Right now I would like our veterans to stand. Let’s thank them for their service (applause).

We also show our gratitude by voting, by staying abreast with the issues that face our nation and community and by getting involved in the affairs of our community. How is the best way to impact our community? By getting involved in the local church. Who else is God’s moral voice and the voice of Truth to our world? Is it Hollywood, Washington, Wall Street, or our Schools? No, it is Christ’s Church. And that means not just speaking and thinking about God on Sundays. It means reaching out in the name of Christ, to our families, neighbors, coworkers, friends, and those who are in need. Who else will do such things?

We have been given our mission and we have been given the power to accomplish that mission. And throughout the ages, God has used the Church not only to proclaim the Gospel but to change society for the better. Without the Church, this world would be a dark, dismal place of despair, decadence, and death. Jesus calls us to be the salt and light of the earth. He knows we, as vessels of His grace, are the only means of hope for a lost and sinful generation.

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And that means not only getting involved it means praying for our world and especially for those in harm’s way. Our nation still is at war. We still are loosing men and women every week in Iraq and in Afghanistan. It is easy to tune out and forget the fact that many families each week are receiving the terrible news of their loved ones death. We have an obligation to pray for our troops every day, to pray for peace for our nation and world, to pray that people come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

That’s why St. Paul wrote in **1 Tim. 2:1-3**: *“Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.”*

What is life all about? Getting to know Jesus Christ. When we know Christ, not only will we have the right perspective on things but we will be truly free to love and serve Him and to love and serve other people.

Jesus said, *“If you abide in My Word...you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free...He whom the Son has set free is free indeed.”* (John 8:31, 36)

So on this Memorial Day weekend, let us never forget, the ones who have gone before us, the ones who paid the ultimate price for our freedom and the freedom of others, and may we never forget the One who died for us that we might be free from the curse of sin and death and that we might be free to forever serve and worship our Great God and Savior. *“For he whom the Son has set free is free indeed!”*

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!